



American Bittern

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SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Botaurus lentiginosus*. Origin of genus uncertain; may stem from the old Latin *bos*, meaning ox, and *taurus*, meaning bull. Both probably allude to the bird's proclivity for bellowing like a bull. The specific epithet stems from the Latin *lent*, referring to lentil-shaped freckles on the upperparts.

DESCRIPTION: About 24- to 30-inches long. Wingspread 42- to 50-inches. About twice the size of the least bittern, which also occurs in Arizona. In flight from above, rich-brown, freckled upperparts, set off by distinctive broad black neck stripes and blackish flight feathers on the rather pointed wings. Underparts whitish, heavily streaked brown. Juveniles more heavily spotted. Fairly stout, weighing a pound or two. Greenish-yellow legs appear relatively short.

HABITAT: Marshlands and very wet meadows. Rarely seen away from dense reeds, rushes, cordgrass, cattails and the other emergent vegetation. Occurs along rivers, lakes, and ponds where marshy habitat is well developed.

DISTRIBUTION: Winters from southern United States well into Central America. Summers north, throughout the United States and central Canada, from coast to coast. Arizona's few breeding birds are now largely confined to the Colorado River, though historically marshes above the east-central Mogollon Rim also had American bitterns. Summering birds are still occasionally reported from a few White Mountains and other high-country localities.

BIOLOGY: *Oonk-a-tsoonk, oonk-a-tsoonk, oonk-a-tsoonk*. The echoing call of this species is as memorable as it is distinctive. The words used to describe it vary from one listener to another, but the cadence and tone of the "thunder pumper" are constant. In the evening and into the dead of night, the guttural call reverberates from sites unknown, rolling across the marsh



like the mist that often helps cloak the caller in utmost secrecy. It resonates throughout the spring, and often well into summer. And it is nice the call is conspicuous and easily recognizable because the caller is among the more difficult of medium-sized birds to see.

Bitterns of any persuasion are elusive. Americans rarely perch in conspicuous sites, preferring to keep their feet on the ground or the thickly matted vegetation that covers the interface between land and water in their marshland haunts. When alarmed, they are more likely to strike a pose and remain motionless than to flush. When posing, they usually hold their bills pointed straight up, resulting in an indistinct brown-streaked thing that looks less like a bird than like the reeds that surround it. Small wonder the casual observer passes by so readily.

Bitterns are masters at stalking, but also at still hunting. Poised motionless at the water's edge, or just beyond, they suddenly thrust their bills forward to seize fish, frogs or snakes. Dragonflies, giant water bugs, and marshland rodents are among

their food items. Availability more than preference dictates diet.

Courtship begins in spring. The male shows his plumage to good advantage, flaring his ruffs much like a grouse or a pheasant. By April, the female has constructed a simple platform nest, which may be 12 to 16 inches across. The nest is composed of dead reeds, rushes, etc. She usually places it on the matted vegetation, a few inches above shallow water but sometimes directly on the ground. Her clutch of three to five eggs may be laid anytime from April (in the south) through June (in the north). Apparently there is only one clutch per year, which hatches at about 24 days. After another 14 days, the still-unflighted young leave the nest.

Raccoons and other egg eaters are among the principal bittern predators. Great horned owls also take a toll.

STATUS: The American bittern is a candidate species on the Department's 1988 list of Threatened Native Wildlife in Arizona, but it is not listed or a candidate for listing by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Many marshes in the rest of its range in the United States and Canada are in better condition than ours. There is no baseline population information for Arizona, and we do not know whether our population is stable, dwindling or increasing. However, given the threats to most wetlands here, it seems likely this species is not increasing. Even where regularly seen or heard, American bitterns are never "abundant." They are solitary birds, and finding even two or three in a day of intensive birding in prime habitat is a memorable event. There is no open season on this species.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: A thorough survey of Arizona wetlands and riparian habitats (and their wildlife inhabitants) would provide essential baseline information on the distribution and abundance of this species. Long-term life history and more intensive population status studies would of course be helpful. Primarily, though, the American bittern's management needs are straightforward—provide the densest possible marshes, with extensive thickets of reeds, rushes, and cattails, and this species will thrive. 